

[By Shay Totten, Seven Days](#)

Now that Congress is back in session, members are getting down to the business of health care reform.

Vermont is well positioned in both chambers thanks to the key committee assignments held by Rep. Peter Welch (D) and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I).

After 16 years in the House, Sanders has worked his way up to a seat on the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

Welch, on the other hand, landed a key position on the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee, in the first half of his second term. Chaired by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), one of the most influential Democrats in Congress, it is ground zero for health care reform.

"Over the decades I've seen many skillful members of Congress, but I have to say he has a great combination of experience, temperament and interpersonal skills — as well as substantive knowledge — that allow him to be particularly effective," Waxman told Seven Days.

Welch also served under Waxman when the California Democrat chaired the feisty House Government Operations and Reform Committee. That committee frequently looked into allegations of fraud and abuse of power during the final years of the Bush administration.

Welch's proximity to power has also meant getting some national exposure. Matt Bai wrote a recent cover story for the New York Times Sunday Magazine about Pres. Barack Obama's congressional outreach. It was illustrated by a big picture of Welch meeting with Obama and a

handful of other Congress critters.

Weeks later, Pres. Obama lauded the introduction of the federal “pay-as-you-go” legislation — which theoretically means Congress must pay for any new program with cuts or new revenue rather than adding to the current federal deficit. As a key sponsor, Welch joined Pres. Obama on the podium during a press conference.

But Welch’s rise to power isn’t about photo ops. He’s already amending key pieces of legislation.

The climate legislation approved this past summer includes a provision that will invest billions of dollars in energy efficiency across the country. The federal program was modeled in large part on the success of Vermont’s weatherization programs as well as Efficiency Vermont, which helps homeowners find ways to cut energy consumption.

Welch’s D.C. success is a major turnabout for a Vermont politician who 20 years ago was on the verge of becoming a political footnote after he lost two high-profile bids for statewide office.

In 1988, then State Sen. Welch was defeated in a four-way Democratic primary for the U.S. House by Rep. Paul Poirier, followed by Secretary of State Jim Guest and Dolores Sandoval. Poirier went on to lose the general election to incumbent Republican Peter Smith, finishing behind Independent Bernie Sanders. Sanders went on to defeat Smith in 1990.

In 1990, Welch ran for governor and lost to Republican Richard Snelling. Welch didn’t hold public office again until 2001, when he was appointed by Gov. Howard Dean to fill a vacant Senate seat. Welch then ran for office on his own and won. He was also elected president pro tem, the Senate chamber’s leader.

In 2006, Welch won a hard-fought battle for the U.S. House seat vacated by Sanders. He defeated a popular Republican — former Adjutant General Martha Rainville. He faced only nominal opposition in 2008 from Progressive Thomas Hermann.

Welch's training as a legislative leader is helping him rise through the Democratic ranks in Congress, notes longtime Vermont political observer and University of Vermont professor Garrison Nelson, coauthor of several books on the inner workings of Congress.

"Peter's great skill is his knowledge of parliamentary procedure," said Nelson. That's not true for many of his colleagues, Nelson adds.

Today's House members sit on several committees, as opposed to just one, as in years past. In other words, more people serve on key panels, said Nelson, which tends to make committee assignments less prestigious.

"Today it's more 'every man for himself,' and someone who understands parliamentary procedure, and in an institution as difficult to navigate as today's contemporary House, is worth his weight in gold. That is really where Peter has been able to step in," adds Nelson. "He is in the perfect position to be a key player in the House to a degree that Bernie never was."

Welch's success is also partly due to the company he keeps. He was one of Waxman's chief vote counters when the California congressman unseated Rep. John Dingell (D-MI) as chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. With his close ties to Detroit's automakers, Dingell could not be counted on to help pass climate change legislation — a key issue for the incoming president.

"I wanted him to come on the energy and commerce committee so we could continue to work together," noted Waxman, who previously chaired the House Government Oversight and Reform Committee, where Welch still retains a seat.

At first, Welch wasn't able to get onto the Energy and Commerce Committee because any open slots had been promised to more senior members. But when Rep. Hilda Solis (D-CA) was appointed Labor Secretary, it created a vacancy: Waxman made sure Welch took her place.

Serving on three high-profile committees — he also serves on the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct — seems to suit Welch.

“The biggest surprise for me was how relevant the work in Montpelier was to doing the work in Washington,” said Welch. “The budget has more zeros and there are more people in the building, but the process is the same when it comes to listening to your constituents and listening to your colleagues and trying to find a constructive way to solve problems.”

Also, Vermont has some experience navigating the shoals of climate change and health care reform. Earlier this year Welch put that experience and his “interpersonal skills” to work by inviting the so-called “Blue Dog” Democrats over for dinner, wine and discussion during the debate on the climate-change bill.

The series of soirées got some ink in the all-important D.C. rag *The Hill* under the headline: “Red wine, Blue Dogs, green agenda.” The meetings took place in the apartment Welch shares with Rep. Jim Cooper (D-TN), one of the so-called “Blue Dog” Dems.

During those discussions — over home-cooked meals or a tray of warmed-up lasagna from Costco — Welch was able to convince Democrats from coal-rich states that the energy-efficiency provisions in the climate change bill he introduced would help to lower electricity costs for consumers. That meant the transition away from a dirtier, albeit cheaper, source of fuel — like coal — would be less traumatic for residents in coal country, Welch said.

Welch hopes to broker similar alliances during the upcoming health care debate. “Peter is right there playing a very active role and has championed the cause of holding down the cost of the bill and bringing about essential reforms in the health care system that curb wasteful spending,” said Waxman.

Those reforms include paying doctors and hospitals for healthy outcomes, not simply the number of procedures they perform on their patients. Lowering costs across the health care system, as well as making public coverage available to those who need it, are crucial elements of true reform, notes Waxman.

Welch hopes his proposal to control costs while transforming an antiquated system will appeal to conservative members of the Democratic caucus. It worked during the climate change debate.

However, like those so-called "Blue Dog" Democrats, Welch — who cosponsored the public-option provision in the House bill — won't say whether he'll fight to keep it in the final bill.

Welch's high profile has also brought him some negative attention. Earlier this year, he was appointed to serve on the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct. One of the first orders of business for the panel was to probe charges against the powerful Rep. Charles Rangel(D-NY). Rangel had previously given Welch \$19,000. Welch returned the money just four days after being appointed — the only "ethics" committee member to do so.

Welch's congressional standing has also made him the focus of Vermont's antiwar movement. He was a vocal critic of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan when he ran, and won, in 2006. And while in Congress, he has voted several times to stop funding the military conflicts unless troops are withdrawn by specific dates. Still, he's been the focus of antiwar protestors who have challenged him in town-hall-style meetings — even occupied his office.

Their hope: He'll push harder to stop the wars and bring the troops home.

Welch, too, said he would like to see troops home sooner rather than later, and has sponsored legislation to accomplish that goal.

"There are some, like me, who believe we never should have been there in the first place," said Welch. "The major thing in electing Barack Obama was to bring our troops home."

After health care reform, the U.S. role in Afghanistan could shape up to be the next big battle in Congress: whether to withdraw troops or step up operations.

Welch remains skeptical of Obama's plans in Afghanistan.

"The current policy of military engagement is one that I have some serious reservations about," he said.